

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Photo available at: <http://dhhs.ne.gov/PublishingImages/YRTC-Overnighters.jpg>

Photo caption: Reading and talking to children is taught in the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in Geneva to teen mothers as an important part of the development of a child. The YRTC added an overnight stay program for babies and children to its Mothers and Babies Program so mothers can apply what they learn before they return home to care for their child.

Mothers in Geneva Treatment Center Enjoy Overnight Stays with Children

(Note: Due to confidentiality laws, the youth quoted in this news release is given another name and the sex of her child is not identified. Instead, "my child" is used.)

Geneva – Teen mothers at the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center in Geneva may have just one night at a time with their child through a new overnight stay program, but it helps them prepare for parenting responsibilities when they leave, according to Danielle Larson, youth counselor.

Larson, who handles the YRTC's Mothers and Babies Program, said two mothers have had overnights with their child; one in October last year and another in mid-March. She said the overnight stays are unique for the YRTC and rare across the nation.

"This program is a major step forward in our mission to prepare women at the YRTC to return to their communities as good, law-abiding citizens who better understand how to nurture their children," said Facility Administrator Dan Scarborough. "We're glad to add this component to our Mothers and Babies Program to provide an additional level of training for our youth so they are more informed and confident in their parenting skills."

Larson said once the youth have demonstrated positive parenting skills, an overnighter may be arranged. The youth find the overnight visits of their children motivating.

"They desire reunification with their child, so they follow the program's expectations and work hard to earn an overnight stay with their child," Larson said. "In addition to demonstrating responsible and mature behavior in the Mothers and Babies program, it's helpful for them to show they are productive and responsible in other YRTC

activities. The overnight visits seem to serve as an incentive to the youth to learn and demonstrate appropriate parenting skills. They also provide an opportunity for a positive experience that we hope will continue after they leave here."

For Denise (not her name), her overnight experience with her child was a reminder to be a good parent all the time; at school, work and with family so she can set a good example for her child. And when the overnighter concluded she said her joy and happiness left with her child.

"That part pushes me to want to do well," Denise said. "When (my child) came to visit me during the week and for the overnighter, it was like I was his day care. It shouldn't be that way. Instead, I should drop (my child) off at day care when I go to school or work."

The mothers are supervised throughout the child's visit from 4 p.m. until 11 a.m. the next day. YRTC staff observes the mother's interactions with her child and provides tips on handling situations. Both mothers were sent to the YRTC by the courts when their children were only a few months old, Larson said. Now that their children are older, they've discovered that caring for them is significantly different.

"Our mothers are very appreciative for the opportunity to care for their child," Larson said "They plan activities for the overnighter, and demonstrate through the Mothers and Babies Program that they are ready for their child's visit. During the overnighter they prepare the meals, coordinate bath and bedtime and are challenged with multi-tasking and balancing the many responsibilities that come along with providing full-time care for their little ones. When it's over, they're worn out."

As the big day approached, Denise valued the chance to care for her child overnight rather than the three hours allowed three days a week. "I wasn't so much nervous as really anxious because it had been a long time since we had that much time together."

She did a lot of planning before the visit, including establishing a routine for the visit and when she returns home. "And, if it doesn't work, then I know what I need to do to fix it."

While children are familiar and have acclimated to the environment at the YRTC because of their routine visits, during the overnighter the crib and room are different than what they may be accustomed to in their home, which usually causes the child to awaken frequently during the night, Larson said.

"Mom has the experience of being awakened several times at night while needing to get up the next day to care for the child," she said. "She begins to understand the demands of parenthood and what it will be like to go to work or school after a short night."

Denise feels the program is beneficial to her and other young mothers at the YRTC. "It tells us what to prepare for and that's important. For instance, I never played with (my child) as much before as I do now. I learned why it's important to do those things for proper development."

When the overnighter ended, she said seeing her child leave made her reflect on what she did to cause that separation. "The other thing the overnighter did for me was to make me realize what I want for my life, how my family will look and what I want for us. I've set goals and I want to reach them for us."

She also discovered that life operates on her child's schedule. "I didn't have that perspective before. I thought I could work (my child) into my schedule and that part of parenting is working to achieve balance for both of them." Now she knows that her life must work within her child's schedule.

Following their child's visit, Larson said the young mothers demonstrate greater maturity and willingness for more responsibility.

How do children react to the extended visit with mom? According to Larson, she's noticed they most enjoy snuggling with mom.

The YRTC converted the former staff housing into overnight apartments with a living room, kitchen, room and crib for the child and a bedroom for mom.

Larson said the Mothers and Babies Program is voluntary, and all YRTC pregnant residents or those with children have participated.